

IT'S "KNOW" CONTEST A Quinquagenary Tribute to the *New York Magazine* Competition

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Chacun à son Brew: An oral history of beer. ▪ Tatami Manville: Much-married Tokyo playboy. ▪ *Idol Curiosity*, by Margaret Mead, author of *Yes, Icon*. ▪ George Abbott's first words: "Play doctor." *Epiphany at Tiffany*: The Biography of Walter Hoving.

This year marks the 50th anniversaries of Woodstock and the moon landing. But another momentous event worthy of celebration is the semicentennial of the beloved *New York Magazine* Competition, which began on January 13, 1969. (Yes, I should have published this tribute at the start of the year, but as Hawthorne might have remarked to Archimedes: "Better Nate than lever!")

Some background: Each Competition posed a challenge involving a pun, wordplay, or another humorous, recreationally linguistic premise. The contests had an enthusiastic, obsessive, almost cultlike following. They ran sort of weekly until July 24, 2000.

For all 31½ years, every Competition, a total of 973, was edited by Mary Ann Madden (1932-2016). The number of entries ranged between 1,500 and 3,000, but some drew many more. A smaller core group of ingenious and witty people submitted persistently. Indeed, some of us regulars were so dedicated that we shamelessly violated the draconian "one entry only" ukase, using pseudonyms for multiple submissions.

The *New York Magazine* Competition wasn't the first of its species, having been preceded by similar contests in several British magazines. In turn, it inspired later ones, such as *The Washington Post* "Invitationals," which continue to this day, and Twitter hashtag games.

In assignments over three decades, readers were dared to create:

Punned foreign phrases. Neologisms. Headlines. Ads. Literary limericks. Double-dactyls. Spoonerisms. Anagrams. Acronyms. Sequels and prequels. Fractured definitions. Misattributed quotations. Parodies in the styles of famous authors. Conversation stoppers. Shortest books. First and last lines of a bad play. Cliché movie lines. Familiar expressions with a single added, omitted, or substituted letter. Book reviews, blurbs, jacket copy. Invented proverbs, fables, musicals. And lots of other potentially amusing premises.

Via search, you can find many, if not all, Competition results online, courtesy of Google Books and the Internet Archive. Selections were compiled into three books: *Thank You for the Giant Sea Tortoise* (Viking, 1971), *Son of Giant Sea Tortoise* (Viking, 1975), and *Maybe He's Dead* (Random House, 1981). I trust that the titles are self-explanatory! All are out of print but can be obtained from used/rare book dealers, both online and IRL. (In the early 1970s, I was in the Navy, usually stationed overseas, so the issues arrived past the submission deadlines. But four of my contributions appear in the final volume.)

Following are a few of my favorite submissions by fellow Competitors. These are mostly drawn from the early years because my sense is that people were cleverer then. As for the thorny issue of originality, there was no Internet or Google decades ago, and thus no way for any of us to discover if our coruscating quips had been anticipated.

- Germany's Unknown Soldier: Anonymous Bosch. (John H. Dorenkamp, Worcester, Mass.)
- *truncheon*, n., afternoon meal at which club sandwiches are served. (Mel Taub, N.Y.C.)
- *Answer*: Plague, Famine, Pestilence, and Death. *Question*: Name three deductible expenses and a capital loss. (Jim McDonough, Bronxville, New York)
- *O Tempura O Morays*: Japanese seafood restaurant. (Eve Gelofsky, Verona, N.J.)
- C/O Le Porter: How to address the tip you neglected to leave at your Paris hotel. (Rorri Feinstein, Bayside, New York)
- Tom Perdue: Author of *Remembrance of Chickens Past*. (Hank Levinson, N.Y.C.)
- First words of Richard Nixon: "I am not a baby." (Dr. Bicycle, N.Y.C.)
- Epitaph for Jacques Brel: "You can change the name of that show now." (Donald Wigal, N.Y.C.)

Now here are samples of my own published entries. By my count, I was in 122 Competitions, and won a coveted prize seven times. Full disclosure: I have repurposed all of these in past *Word Ways* articles, so this is a quick single-paragraph roundup:

Apparel of Monkeys: Costumers, Planet of the Apes. ▪ Curie-o's: radioactive cereal. ▪ *A Scent of Man*: The Compleat Bloodhound's Manual. ▪ Ra Ra Avis: Cheer infrequently heard in Hertz board meetings. ▪ *Chapter 11*: Neil Simon's only unsuccessful play. ▪ Mean Cuisine: Packaged meals for macho types. ▪ *Headline*: Podiatrist Sued, Callus Neglect Alleged. ▪ What's never included with the portable hot tray? A Salton battery. ▪ *I, of the Needle*: Cleopatra's Secret Diaries. ▪ What makes the next Kleenex pop up? Connective tissue. ▪ Proposed TV series: *Tarara Boom, D.A.*: Stripper turned prosecutor fights big-city crime. ▪ Cyrano de Bergerac: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même nose*.

The magazine revived the Competitions online from 2013 to 2016. But it was never quite the same.

Finally, about those prizes. Mostly, a free subscription to the magazine, or an extension of your existing one. That certainly wasn't the primary incentive for passionate participants. So what was?

In a *Wall Street Journal* article about the Competitions (January 8, 1978), Kitty Yancey, a contributor in Knoxville, Tenn., suggested that the motivations involved both intelligence and snobbism: "It makes you think you're clever. . . . People are trying to show off their knowledge." Further: "It's challenging. You have to do some thinking."

Sounds right to me. I second the notion!

The examples in the lead paragraph are my own published Competition entries.